

FUR MANAGEMENT IN ONTARIO

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Furbearing animals are a valuable resource in Ontario, and the management of that resource has proven to be very successful.

Trapping is the oldest industry in the province, and Ontario is still one of the world's major suppliers of fine quality wild furs.

These are the basic facts of fur management in Ontario, but the whole story covers more than three centuries of our history, the ups and downs of the fur trade and the application of increased knowledge and co-operation.

Today, trapping is regulated by laws, policies administered by the Ministry of Natural Resources, tradition and some rules of conduct. However, the basic element in fur management is co-operation. Trappers, as individuals or through their local or provincial councils, work with Ministry of Natural Resources staff in developing sound management programs. This co-operation between the trapper and the wildlife manager is the key to the success of Ontario's fur management programs.

These broad programs include such things as licences, open and closed seasons, quotas, registered traplines, pelt sealing, research and trapper workshops. Details of these important elements of fur management are included here.



HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF FUR MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS



Events and conditions in Europe played a major role in the development of the fur trade in Ontario. In the 16th century, the need for farm land and a lack of proper management had created a scarcity of furbearers in the Old World. Felt hats manufactured from beaver hair became highly fashionable in the early 17th century, and as the early explorers moved west through Canada, beaver pelts were the most sought-after fur. It was about this time that the fur trade began in Ontario through the French explorer Brulé, who spent a year with the Algonquin in 1611 near Georgian Bay. A few years later, Champlain was granted the first fur trade monopoly by the King of France, but this was soon challenged by agents from Dutch and English traders. The fierce competition for furs led to intermittent wars between European traders and various Indian tribes who acted as their agents. In 1670, the Hudson's Bay Company, with British backing, was granted the exclusive fur trading rights for all the land draining into Hudson Bay and James Bay. However, it was another 150 years before the Hudson's Bay Company finally gained complete control of the fur trade. In the meantime, the competitive trading and intensive trapping had caused serious declines in fur populations.

In 1860, the first law controlling the trapping of fur-bearing animals in Ontario was passed by the Legislature of Canada West, as Ontario was known at that time. The law established seasons on six species — beaver, muskrat, otter, mink, marten and fisher, and for the next 55 years, the seasons were adjusted, often closed, in an effort to halt the decline in these species.



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However, law enforcement was almost non-existent and the fur harvest continued to shrink.

In the period between 1916 and 1945, Ontario began to develop strict control of its fur resources. New and tougher laws were passed. Trappers and fur dealers were controlled, for the first time, through licensing. Beaver and otter harvests were restricted, and the pelts had to be sealed before being sold. A system of royalty payments was started and export permits were required for foreign sales. Seasons were reduced in some areas and closed in others. Houses and dens of some species were protected, and game preserves were established. Game wardens were hired to enforce the new trapping laws and penalties were increased. It took a while, but the regulations had a positive effect. For the first time in many years, fur populations in Ontario began to rise.

By 1945 the value of fur management had become established. It was also about this time that the trappers and fur managers decided a more co-operative effort was required. While the trapper needed good management of the resource to ensure an abundant supply, he was recognized as a valuable source of information about the biology and habits of furbearers — information the managers needed to develop their programs. Within a few years the registration of traplines on Crown lands became law, and with financial assistance from the federal government because of its responsibilities to native peoples, a trapline system of management began. Trapline management officers were appointed and meetings were held with trappers across the province.



Seasons were extended with quotas to include fisher, marten, lynx and wolverine, along with beaver and otter. In addition, all pelts under the quota system had to be sealed before they could be sold. Trappers were required to submit a map of their trap-lines with the location of all beaver lodges marked on it. Finally, a provincial association and local trappers' councils were formed, along with the Ontario Trappers Association which was established, in part, as a marketing service so that Ontario's trappers could receive a more realistic price for their pelts.

In the early post-war period, furbearer populations in Ontario continued to increase, but in the 1950s and early 1960s, the fur industry went into a recession because of low consumer demand. As fur prices fell and harvests were reduced, the effects of overcrowding among furbearing animals began to appear. Rabies infected fox populations in the north, kidney worms destroyed many wild mink south of Parry Sound, and tularemia killed beaver in northwestern Ontario. Soon, the transplanting of beaver, fisher and marten to areas of low population became an important part of the fur management program.

The fur industry has recovered from that period of depression and now appears to be in a healthy condition. Furbearer populations and trapper harvests are at the highest levels ever recorded in Ontario. There are now about 16,000 licensed trappers in the province and they operate under a comprehensive system of management programs.

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animals
of
Ontario*

Furbearing animals of Ontario



Ministry of
Natural
Resources

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LICENCES SEASONS QUOTAS



LICENCES: Every trapper, except farmers on their own land, must obtain a licence and have it renewed every year. Farmer-trappers are issued a free permit annually. Each licence or permit has a number identifying the trapper and where he or she traps. This system is the basis for collecting information on trapper performance and the quality of pelts. This information is needed to determine harvest trends and animal population levels and cycles. It is also used to set seasons and harvest quotas.

SEASONS: Furbearers may be trapped only during the open season. At one time, seasons were imposed to reduce the harvest, but now with populations at a high level, the seasons are primarily used to ensure that animals are taken when pelts are in prime condition.



QUOTAS: The main management tool used these days to control animal harvests is the setting of quotas, which is the allowable harvest level that a species can sustain. A trapper may be assigned annual quotas for any species which could be affected by over-harvesting. To guard against under-harvesting, the trapper is required to take at least 75 per cent of each quota. This reduces the possibility of over-population which could lead to deterioration of the habitat, increased stress among animals or the outbreak of disease.

REGISTERED TRAPLINES

SEALING OF PELTS

RESEARCH

REGISTERED TRAPLINES: Crown land in Ontario is divided into more than 2,800 registered areas called traplines. Every trapper on Crown land is assigned a specific trapline and given the exclusive trapping rights for that area. As a result, competition is eliminated and each trapper can manage the fur resources on a long term basis. The traplines are also useful for gathering data, and provide for management of small units of land. They also encourage close co-operation between the trapper and the wildlife manager — a key to good fur management.



SEALING OF PELTS: The sealing of pelts was first introduced in 1916 to stop illegal trafficking of furs. It was decreed that coupons had to be attached to beaver and otter pelts before they could be offered for sale. Today, the pelts of fisher, marten, mink and lynx must also be stamped with the provincial emblem. The stamp, or seal, provides control over harvests and sales, and is also useful as an advertisement for Ontario's wild furs.



RESEARCH: Started in the late 1940s. Research now provides a sound biological basis for fur management programs. It has led to a better knowledge of behaviour, the development of aging techniques, the aerial census of beaver colonies and the identification, study and monitoring of parasites and diseases.

TRAPPER WORKSHOPS



These workshops are provided by the Ministry of Natural Resources in co-operation with the Ontario Trappers Association. Courses are given on the biology and habits of furbearers, humane trapping techniques, skinning and preparation of pelts and the preparation, care and repair of equipment. The workshops are updated and expanded continually, and make it possible for novice and seasoned trappers to gain more knowledge about their profession.

IN SUMMARY:

Fur management in Ontario will continue to be progressive and make certain that the use of the resource is wise. It will also make sure that the harvest does not exceed the capacity of the habitat to renew this valuable resource.

In Ontario, the Ministry of Natural Resources and the trappers work together to achieve this goal. The Trappers Code of Ethics is designed as a set of self-imposed rules of conduct adopted by the trappers to control the use of undesirable trapping devices or techniques, and to promote desirable habits.

Fur management is a Ministry of Natural Resources program working for the benefit of all, today and in the future.

For more information:
Fur Management Unit
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Toronto, Ontario M7A 1W3



CODE OF CONDUCT FOR TRAPPERS

- 1** Land sets should be inspected daily.
- 2** Raccoon, marten and fisher should be trapped only with Conibear traps.
- 3** Sliding locks should be used with all water or shore sets. Heavy weights should not be attached directly to traps set on shore.
- 4** A modified Conibear trap with the frames bent inward to ensure tighter closure should be used in trapping.
- 5** A very short trap chain should be used with leg-hold traps set on land to catch lynx, foxes, wolves or coyotes.
- 6** Traps should not be set where cats and dogs or other unwanted animals may be caught.
- 7** Feeding stations for birds and animals should be maintained on the trapline.
- 8** Muskrats from over-populated marshes and beaver from ponds with inadequate food supplies should be trapped heavily.
- 9** Each trapper should assist farmers, cottagers and other landowners within his area who have problems with nuisance animals.
- 10** Diseased animals should be reported or submitted to the Ministry of Natural Resources promptly.
- 11** The meat from beaver, muskrat, raccoon and lynx can be eaten. Carcasses not used for human consumption or bait should be fed to birds or wild animals.
- 12** Provincial and local trapper's councils deserve trappers' support.
- 13** Trappers should teach their children or other interested young people how to trap, care for pelts and take care of themselves outdoors.
- 14** Black bear should be trapped only with foot snares.



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